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LAURE DE GRAMONT

Black is beautiful at Centre Pompidou and galerie Mitterrand



Agustín Cárdenas, "Couple Antillais", 1957-1972 at Galerie Mitterrand, rue du Temple and rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré

It is an extraordinary coincidence that the artist who struck me the most at "Paris Noir", the new exhibition at Centre Pompidou, was the Cuban sculptor **Agustín Cárdenas**, (1927-2001), who is also shown at galerie **Mitterrand**, Temple and Saint Honoré, starting on April 1. After living for forty years in Paris from 1955 to 1994, he returned to Havana where he died. The huge show uncovers 150 (many are little known) artists from Africa, the Caribbean and African American, in a multifaceted exhibit and it is one of the last show before the center closes for five years in July. The curator **Alicia Knock** chose with four co-curators to trace fifty years of black artistic expression in Paris during the 1950-2000 years. The exhibition traces the Independence of Africa, the civil rights movement in the US and the fight for equality in France. Its size is a little overwhelming, but I learned a lot about the "Poetics of relation" between all these worlds, described by **Edouard Glissant** in the magazine **Présence africaine**.

The exhibition is really about the weight of history, the Pan-African Paris, which played a pivotal role in shaping a cultural identity of the African diaspora. A black international consciousness emerged around Negritude thinkers such as poet **Leopold Sédar Senghor** (the first President of Senegal), and editor Alioune Diop. **Aimé and Suzanne Césaire** in Guadeloupe and **James Baldwin** in America, and how they mingled with artists. In Paris, they trained with Fernand Léger and Ossip Zadkine and explored the Musée de l'Homme's African collections. Cuban painter **Wifredo Lam** infused surrealism with an Afro Atlantic vocabulary.

From the fifties, exhibitions of the Congo's Poto-Poto school, the Shona movement in Zimbabwe and Osogbo in Nigeria, brought modern African artists into the limelight and a World Festival of Negro Arts took place in Dakar in 1966. All this was made possible by the energy Paris at the time. African American artists were treated as American heroes after the war and Joséphine Baker's huge success in the 1930's. Free jazz in the 1960's also had an impact on many artists who were sometimes musicians themselves and led them to create collages or improvise on new themes in poetic performances.

I felt that this show was like a crash course in Black art history, mingling all the different influences which met in Paris, the center of contemporary art, in the fifties. The American painter from Tennessee, **Beauford Delaney**, is very present in the show with an interesting portrait of **Marian Anderson**, the famous African American contralto and a key figure in the Civil Rights movement. He explored the interplay between colour and motif. Set against a bright yellow background, – which symbolises transcendence and hope – an idea Delaney had been experimenting with since the 1960s, Anderson is portrayed frontally, evoking the style of a Byzantine icon. The work “vibrates like a strange music.” His use of “**impasto**” captures the texture of sound, resulting in a rich, abstract, and expressionistic surface.

The show ends with the abstract painter from the Dominican Republic, **Vicente Pimentel**, (b.1947) who came to Marseille in 1970 and settled in Paris. **Henri Guédon** evokes the KKK, while **Frantz Absalon** creates a sculpture in pine wood called “Freedom”. **Pascale Marthine Tayou** shows a beautiful totem and Ivory Coast embroiderer **Clem Lawson**, shows “Anxiety on the Escalator”, a dramatic fresco made of glass pearls.

The show is very large and the cartels extensive but the accumulation of works is enlightening.

Until June 30 at Centre Pompidou and Cárdenas at **Galerie Mitterrand**.

An exhibition on Wifredo Lam will be in November, the first show (as director) curated by the Swiss curator **Christophe Cherix**, 55, who was named director of MoMa last Friday. He is taking the leadership position from Glenn Lowry who occupied the position for thirty years. He was until now chief curator for the department of drawings and prints.